1982

The Treatment of Women in the History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia

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The Treatment of Women in
The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia
(TITLE)

BY

Cindy Fritz

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Arts

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

1982
YEAR

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Abstract

Dr. Samuel Johnson, one of the most prolific and profound contributers to the English language, is, unfortunately, better known for his life and his anti-feminist point of view. James Boswell, in his book The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D., provides many pieces of Johnson's conversations which attempt to illustrate the doctor's belief that women were unable to understand the complexities of anything beyond their domestic duties, a belief widely supported among the classes throughout the seventeenth century until the middle eighteenth century. However, this paper, using historical and biographical evidence, demonstrates that Johnson's attitude towards women, specifically in his work, The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia, supported the later, more liberal eighteenth century attitude towards women.

Chapter II, "Servant to Companion," focuses on the differences between early eighteenth century attitudes and middle to late eighteenth century attitudes towards women. The women of the first half of the century were considered the submissive sex and were kept weak by an inadequate educational system. Studies in boarding schools during this time concentrated on "curious work," such as embroidery and needlework, arts designed to attract

husbands. By the late eighteenth century, however, women were being accepted on more equal terms and were provided with a more complete education, which included history, math, and the classics. Favorable changes for women were also recognized in the areas of domestic and financial responsibilities.

Although it is admitted that Johnson was sometimes a sharp critic of womanhood, he recognized the positive change in attitude and tried to support this change in the treatment of the female characters in Rasselas. This support was due in many ways to his own experiences and his own relationships with women. This interpretation is explained in Chapter III, "Autobiographical Motives for Johnson's Depiction of the Women in Rasselas." By comparing the comments made by Johnson himself and the comments made by the characters, it is demonstrated that the principle female characters come closer to Johnson's viewpoints than Rasselas. Also, as with the women Johnson admired, Nekayah and Pekuah are strong characters, able to make their own way in a predominately male-oriented society.

Finally, Chapter IV, "Johnson's Treatment of the Rasselas Women," and Chapter V, "The Conclusion, in Which Much is Concluded," illustrate that the doctor's view of the women in Rasselas is not that of an anti-feminist, but that of a man who advocated the changed opinions towards women.

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I. Introduction

Dr. Samuel Johnson, the central figure in an age of bourgeois classicism, penned satirical poems, such as "London" and "The Vanity of Human Wishes," reference works, such as the Dictionary of the English Language, critical studies, as with the Lives of the Poets, and moral essays in The Rambler and the Idler, and the moral novel, The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia. Yet, for all his contributions to modern English literature and language, he is best known for his life and his supposedly anti-feminist point of view. The most common quotation given to support his bigotry is presented in Boswell's Life of Johnson:

> When Boswell told him that he had heard a woman preach at a Quacker meeting, Johnson replied: "Sir, a woman's preaching is like a dog's walking on his hinder legs. It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all."[1]

Boswell offers other pieces of Johnson's conversations that attempt to illustrate the doctor's belief that all women, as was widely believed among the classes throughout the seventeenth century until the middle eighteenth century, did not understand subjects beyond the home:

> When a lady talked to him of republicanism, he asked her to permit the footman to sit down and eat with them. "I, thus, Sir, showed her the absurdity of the levelling

doctrine. She has never liked me since."[2]

Thus, it appears that to Johnson women cannot understand politics or other worldly events because all women are inferior to men.

> Mrs. Knowles affected to complain that men had much more liberty allowed them than women.... Mrs. Knowles. 'Still, Doctor, I cannot help thinking it a hardship that more indulgence is allowed to men than to women. It gives a superiority to men, to which I do not see how they are entitled.' Johnson. 'It is plain, Madam, one or the other must have the superiority. As Shakespeare says, "If two men ride on a horse, one must ride behind."' Dilly. 'I suppose, Sir, Mrs. Knowles would have them to ride in panniers, one on each side.' Johnson. 'Then, Sir, the horse would throw them both.'[3]

With this evidence, it seems Johnson deserves his title of "anti-feminist." However, an accurate description of Johnson is that he was an admirer of women, or at least of women who were educated and sensitive, traits which were no more or less than those he admired in a man. Dr. Johnson read Miss Helen Maria Williams' "Ode on the Peace" and was so touched by the poignancy of the lines that, according to Boswell, when he met her "he took her by the hand in the most courteous manner, and repeated the finest stanza of her poem; this was the most delicate and pleasing compliment he could pay."[4]

Mrs. Williams, his blind companion, was revered by Johnson, as is reflected in a letter to Mrs. Lucy Porter after her death:

> Last month died Mrs. Williams, who has

> been to me for thirty years in the place of a sister: her knowledge was great, and her conversation pleasing. I now live in cheerless solitude.[5]

He also relished the company of Mrs. Thrale, for as Boswell noticed "the vivacity of Mrs. Thrale's literary talk roused him to cheerfulness and exertion, even when they were alone."[6] Not only aware of her conversational abilities, but also of her sensitivity, he gave Mrs. Thrale the only copy of a poem he repeated on his death bed of a man coming of age.

His wife, Elizabeth Johnson, fondly known as Tetty, was his confidant, friend, and mate. He had respect for her judgment of his work as Boswell noted:

> Mrs. Johnson, in whose judgment and taste he had great confidence, said to him, after a few numbers of The Rambler had come out, 'I thought very well of you before; but I did not imagine you could have written anything equal to this.' Distant praise, from whatever quarter, is not so delightful as that of a wife whom a man loves and esteems.[7]

Thus, the people closest to his mind and heart were women who were sensitive enough to look behind his grotesque figure to the philosophical workings of his mind.

This paper, using historical and biographical data, will demonstrate that Johnson's attitude towards the women in his work, The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia, supported the later, more lenient eighteenth century attitude towards women. Chapter II, "Servant to Companion," will illustrate the differences between early eighteenth

century attitudes and middle to late eighteenth century attitudes towards women. Chapter III, "Autobiographical Motives for Johnson's Depiction of the Women in Rasselas," will provide evidence as to why Johnson supported the more liberal viewpoints towards women, specifically in Rasselas. Finally, Chapter IV, "Johnson's Attitudes Towards the Rasselas Woman," and Chapter V, "The Conclusion, in Which Much is Concluded," will demonstrate that the doctor's attitude towards the women in Rasselas is not that of an "anti-feminist," but that of a man who advocated the changed opinions towards women.

II. Servant to Companion

In Samuel Johnson's day, modesty and diffidence, gentleness and meekness were looked upon as the appropriate virtues and characteristic graces of the female sex. These were appropriate elements in the female nature because by Divine Law a woman was the weak or submissive sex. Lord Halifax's "Advice to a Daughter," first published in 1688, represented the traditional view of mating arrangements and was continually republished throughout the early eighteenth century. It provided an explanation to his daughter "of the disadvantages belonging to your sex."[8]

> You must first lay it down for a foundation in general, that there is inequality in the sexes, and that for the better economy of the world, the men, who were to be the law givers, had the larger share of reason bestowed upon them, by which means your sex is the better prepared for the compliance that is necessary for the better performance of those duties which seem to be the most properly assigned to it.[9]

Even Mary Astell, an early advocate of the feminist movement who wrote during the early eighteenth century, gave the female no more rights than the veto of a totally incompatible partner:

> Modesty requiring that a woman should not love before marriage, but only make choice

> of one whom she can love hereafter; she who has none but innocent affections being easily able to fix them where duty requires.[10]

Thus, a single man sought a compliant woman with domestic excellence, who would consider the home the place of the principal delight. Boarding schools during the seventeenth century and the early eighteenth century specialized in "curious work," which consisted of card-playing, needlework, embroidery, paper-cutting, patch-work, and other trivia which Doctor Johnson called "petty occupations."[11] These time-consuming arts were taught to attract husbands and keep the wives busy during their leisure time after their marriages.

Lady Louisa Stuart wrote in the 1820's that in the first decades of the eighteenth century "the education of women had then reached its lowest ebb, and if not co-quettes or gossips or diligent card-players, their best praise was to be diligent housewives."[12]

However, slowly over the eighteenth century, many educational advantages and views toward women began to change for the better. This change can be seen by noting the comments of several people throughout the century. In 1706, Mary Astell argued that men were destroying the advantages of marital bliss by depriving girls of a good education. "How can a man respect his wife when he has a contemptible opinion of her and her sex...so that folly and a woman are equivilant terms with him?"[13] Not a passionate revolutionary like Mary Wollstonecraft of the

next century, but a Christian woman who only wanted her sex to be a better companion with her mate, Mary Astell still ran into opposition from male attitudes. In the 1720's, Jonathon Swift wrote, "A little wit is valued in a woman, as we are pleased with a few words spoken plain by a parrot."[14] Yet, nearly seventy years later, Samuel Johnson wrote, "All our ladies read now, which is a great extension." As a consequence, he believed that "the ladies of the present age...were more faithful to their husbands, and more virtuous in every respect than in former times, because their understandings were better cultivated."[15] These differing comments on women and their education do not, of course, mean that there were no witty or well-educated women in the eighteenth century. They only provide evidence that during Johnson's lifetime there were conspicuous changes, both in education itself and in the attitudes towards learned women.

Boarding schools for middle and higher class women in the late eighteenth century began to teach history, literature, including the classics, and languages, as well as curious work. The Ladies Monthly Magazine, or Entertaining Companion for the Fair Sex, which appeared in 1770 as the first successful women's periodical, stated that "many women have received a much better education than Shakespeare enjoyed."[16] And in 1791, The Gentleman's Magazine admitted that "the fair sex has asserted its rank and challenged that natural equality of intellect

which nothing but the influence of human institutions could have concealed for a moment."[17]

In the early part of the century, the home was a monarchial patriarchy. In 1703, Lady Chudleigh wrote a satirical poem addressed "To the Ladies" which began, "Wife and servant are the same,/But only differ in the name."[18] And in 1727, Daniel Defoe wrote that "the money and the maidenhead is the subject of our meditations," with the outcome being "how much marriage, how little friendship."[19] But, as with education for women, there slowly came a favorable change, the rise of the companionate marriage, in which mutual love and respect became more important than financial and domestic duties. The guardian of Mary Hamilton, born in 1756, gave her ward advice when she turned seventeen years of age which would probably not have been given fifty years earlier: "never to enter into engagements without the consent of her parents and friends, but also never to take the man her friends desire without consulting her own heart."[20]

Samuel Johnson, although sometimes a sharp critic of women's wiles and abilities, recognized the positive change in attitude towards women and the capabilities of intelligent, learned women. He respected their status and rights in a predominately male-oriented England, due in a very basic way to his personal relationships with women. Thus, in his moral story, The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia, Johnson tries to reflect and support

this change in attitude in his treatment of the Princess Nekayah and her companion, Pekuah. Johnson portrays these women as strong characters, capable of understanding humankind in all its complexities, just as the women of the later eighteenth century were finally being recognized for their perceptiveness of the human condition.

III. Autobiographical Motives for Johnson's Depiction of the Women in Rasselas

Samuel Johnson's story, The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia, a miniature example of the Bildungsroman, conceals its intentions in the outward guise of two currently popular literary genres, the Eastern Tale and the Pilgrimage. However, the autobiographical motive is the body of the work. Many of the stern reflections on social and domestic life in Rasselas took their source from its author's ability to understand the changing attitudes towards women and his ability to remember the positive effect women had on him during his early years and throughout his lifetime. A knowledge of Johnson's own life helps the reader understand why Johnson's attitude towards the women and their ideas in Rasselas is a positive one and his tone towards Rasselas and many of his ideas is ironic.

The first startling illustration of the continuity between life and book is related in the chapter, "A Debate on Marriage Continued." Rasselas and Nekayah discuss the subject of marriage, with Rasselas deciding that "marriage is evidently the dictate of nature; men and women were made to be companions of each other (Chapt. XXXVIII)...." Yet, Nekayah believes "that marriage is

rather permitted than approved, and that none, but by the instigation of a passion too much endulged, entangle themselves with indissoluble compacts (Chapt. XXVIII)." As with Nekayah, Johnson did not view marriage as natural to man. When asked by Boswell if man and woman were made for one another, Johnson answered:

> Marriages would in general be as happy, and often more so, if they were all made by the Lord Chancellor, upon a due consideration of characters and circumstances, without the parties having any choice in the matter.[21]

Johnson denounced marriage especially for women, for he understood how women's lives are changed by the repetition of vows, including those of his own wife, Elizabeth:

> Marriage, Sir, is much more necessary to a man than to a woman....I had often wondered why young women should marry, as they have so much more freedom, and so much more attention paid to them while unmarried, than when married.[22]

This condemnation of marriage does not, however, mean that Johnson was against the institution, for as Nekayah states, "Marriage has many pains, but celibacy has no pleasures (XXVIII)." Boswell echoed this comment when he wrote that to Johnson, "Even ill-assorted marriages were preferable to cheerless celibacy."[23] Johnson's own marriage to the widow Elizabeth Jervis Porter on July 5, 1735, was a major turning point in his life. His confidence returned after another of his bouts of feared insanity, and he found a job tutoring a boy for the university. Also, on the preceeding May 18th, Johnson finally

asked for the return of his books from Oxford, five and one-half years after his leave from school.[24] Although his marriage was punctuated by many problems, including his guilt over using his wife's dowry for his own livelihood, which caused many separations of time and distance, Johnson loved his Tetty and was devastated by her death in 1752.[25] Hence, for Johnson in reality and Nekayah in fiction, the single life is apparently not an acceptable alternative to the manacles of marriage. As Nekayah states to Rasselas:

> To live without feeling or exciting sympathy, to be fortunate without adding to the felicity of others, or afflicted without tasting the balm of pity is a state more gloomy than solitude; it is not retreat but exclusion from mankind (XVIII).

Thus, it is not a man, or at least not Rasselas, whom Johnson uses to voice his opinion concerning marriage, but the woman, Nekayah.

Another illustration of the principal female characters being presented better than Rasselas is during the discussion of the right time to marry, another subject for debate between the two siblings. Rasselas, without witnessing any domestic situations, advocates late marriages, for he asserts that rivalry between parents and children will occur:

> The son is eager to enjoy the world before the father is willing to forsake it,.... The daughter begins to bloom before the mother can be content to fade...(XXIX).

Yet, Nekayah has "been told that late marriages are not eminently happy (XXIX)." Johnson, the unhappy offspring of an unhappy late marriage, Sarah having been thirty-seven years old and Michael forty-nine when Johnson was born, agreed with Nekayah's viewpoint. "My mother and father," said Johnson, "had not much happiness from each other."[26] Since his parents married "when opinions are fixed and habits are established;...and the mind has long enjoyed the contemplation of its own prospects (XXIX)," to use Nekayah's words, it was hard for either his mother or his father to be sympathetic to the other's needs or wants:

> They seldom conversed; for my father could not bear to talk of his business affairs; and my mother being unacquainted with books, cared not to talk of anything else.[27]

Johnson also believed that late marriages hurt not only the partners of the agreement, but also their children. Speaking to Boswell of his own childhood, Boswell wrote:

> That (said he to me one day) is the great misery of late marriages, the unhappy produce of them becomes the plaything of dotage: an old man's child (continued he) leads much such a life, I think, as a little boy's dog, teized with awkward fondness, and forced perhaps to sit up and beg...to divert a company, who at last go away complaining of their disagreeable entertainment.[28]

Johnson felt used and neglected by his parents and believed as did Nekayah that although older parents "have less to fear, they have less also to hope (XXIX)" from

their children. As Boswell states in his Life of Johnson: "He did not approve of late marriages, observing that more was lost in point of time, than compensated for by any possible advantages."[29] Once again, Rasselas's ideas are not supported by Johnson, while the woman's opinion is close to Johnson's own viewpoint.

Since his parents' relationship suffered from a severe lack of communication, Johnson's support of educated women in Rasselas also has an autobiographical motive. Johnson told Boswell, "Contrary to the popular notion, a woman would not be the worse wife for being learned."[30] Using his own parents as an example,

> he observed, that a man of sense and education should meet a suitable companion in a wife. It was a miserable thing when the conversation could only be such as, whether the mutton should be boiled or roasted, and probably a dispute about that.[31]

The idea of a woman's chief art being her ability to converse was not Johnson's way of insulting a woman's intelligence, but a method of complimenting a woman's talent. A man who valued conversation, Johnson once stated:

> There is in this world no real delight (excepting those of sensuality), but exchange of ideas in conversation; and whoever has once experienced the full flow of London talk, when he returns to country friendships and rural sports, must either be contented to turn baby again and play with the rattle, or he will pine away like a great fish in a little pond, and die for want of his usual food.[32]

Thus, it is not the prattle of idle gossip Johnson needs, but the "vivacity of Mrs. Thrale's literary talk" or the knowledgeable utterances of his blind companion, Mrs. Williams. Boswell said of Mrs. Williams:

> Her peculiar value was the intimacy in which she had long lived with Johnson, by which she was well acquainted with his habits, and knew how to lead him on to talk.[33]

Both Nekayah and her lady-in-waiting, Pekuah, are well-versed in the art of conversation, which draws the admiration of the male characters. The Arab, who kidnaps Pekuah, insisting that he is only an entrepreneur, becomes so captivated by the intelligent conversation of his captive that he is willing to delay procuring a ransom. Tired of his harem women who can talk of nothing since they have seen nothing, "he sometimes turned away disgusted (XXXIX)" from their attention. Yet, the Arab, recognizing mental ability, "delighted to hear(XXXIX)" her comments and wishes to share his knowledge of the stars with this woman. Even Imlac, whom many critics believe to be Johnson's representative, recognizes her conversational abilities: "How could a mind, hungry for knowledge, be willing, in an intellectual famine, to lose such a banquet as Pekuah's conversation (XXIX)?" The Astronomer also recognizes the talents of Pekuah, and it is this hand-maiden alone who diverts the scientist's attention from his obsession with controlling the seasons. Imlac knows that Pekuah has been taught the science of

the stars by the Arab, and yet he doubts her persuasiveness. Confident of her ability, Pekuah states, "My knowledge is, perhaps, more than you imagine it, and by concurring always with his opinions I shall make him think it greater than it is (XLVI)." Finally, even Imlac must agree that Pekuah is a "prodigy of genius (XLVI)," for he advises the Astronomer to "fly to business or to Pekuah (XLVI)" if he feels the compulsion to control the skies.

Samuel Johnson, like the Arab and the Astronomer, believes that a woman's talents should be recognized and appreciated. Johnson's wife was intelligent, able to read and comprehend the depth of her husband's works. This trust in his wife's knowledge is expressed in the quote mentioned in Chapter I from Boswell's Life of Johnson. As Boswell noted of Tetty: "Her approbation may be said to 'come home to his bosom;' and being so near, its effect is most sensible and permanent."[34] Thus, Johnson finds his work more enjoyable when his talents can be understood by his female companion.

Johnson also appreciated the company and works of the literary ladies of the eighteenth century:

> I dined yesterday at Mrs. Garrick's, with Mrs. Carter, Miss Hannah More, and Miss Fanny Burney. Three such women are not to be found....[35]

When asked about another writer, Mrs. Montagu, Johnson answered:

> Sir, Mrs. Montagu does not make a trade of her wit; but Mrs. Montagu is a very extraordinary woman; she

> has a constant stream of conversation, and it is always impregnated; it has always meaning.[36]

Johnson even admired Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, a woman who argued that true marriage must be based upon intellectual companionship and educational opportunities must be equal for men and women. In 1777, she was introduced to Dr. Johnson, and shortly after became his literary adviser, he having previously purchased her Thoughts on the Education of Daughters.[37] Obviously, Johnson admires women who, like Nekayah and Pekuah, can handle themselves in a man's world.

Another circumstance which demonstrates the favorable treatment of women, linking Johnson's life and his work, is Pekuah's experience with the Astronomer as both his student and his instructor. In Rasselas, Imlac tells the eager, young Pekuah when she announces her intentions to become a student of the Astronomer while at the same time his instructive diversion, "Men advanced far in knowledge do not love to repeat the elements of their art (XLVI)." However, Pekuah becomes the quiet instructor for the Astronomer. She directs his attention; she does not confine his talents. Pekuah is an asset to the Astronomer, something Johnson was not sure a teacher could be.

As Imlac stated, brilliant men do not enjoy teaching. Johnson was no exception. Although he became a schoolmaster, he detested it. However, he admired those who

could teach, and his role models were educated men who, like Pekuah, guided but did not instruct. His cousin Cornelius Ford and the lawyer Gilbert Walmesly were two role models who recognized Johnson's talents and gave him the financial and educational opportunities to use them. Thus, Johnson's role models acted in a way similar to the way Pekuah acts towards the Astronomer.

The final link between reality and fiction, which once again favors the women over Rasselas, is the "choice of life." Although the three characters now know the world, the women direct their final journeys towards unworldly prospects. Pekuah has become enamoured of religion and the Princess has decided that knowledge is the proper "choice of life." Rasselas, ironically, has chosen a worldly vocation, politics, even when he has seen the detrimental effects it has on the administrators and the subjects. Unsatisfied with a "little kingdom," "he could never fix the limits of his dominion and was always adding to the number of his subjects (XLIX)." Johnson, one of the supreme moralists of modern times who dedicated his life to religion before his death, believed that man is naturally evil and that any good or virtue he is able to acquire comes only through the natural snares of man which trap him and seal the inevitable doom of man.[39] A theme characteristic of Johnson is the helpless vulnerability of the individual before the social context. It is this vulnerability to which Rasselas succumbs

because of his need for power. Pekuah has attained the highest goal possible according to Johnson: she wishes to dedicate her life to religion.

The favorable treatment of women in Rasselas is evident despite the story's generalities. The structure of Rasselas appears to have been worked to include many literary forms, such as the Eastern Tale, the Pilgrimage, the fairy tale , and the moral essay, and to represent all inhabitants of the Happy Valley. Even the name Rasselas was chosen for its generality because "ras" is the root word for "chief" in Arabic, Hebrew, and Semetic languages. For all the story's abstractions, however, it is the women, based on Johnson's beliefs, who comprehend life's futilities while Rasselas is satirized for his misconceptions about life.

IV. Johnson's Attitudes Towards the Rasselas Women

Samuel Johnson recognized changing attitudes towards women and, due in part to this recognition and in part to his personal relationships with many learned women of his time, he tries to reflect this change in attitude in his treatment of the principal female characters in Rasselas, the Princess Nekayah and her companion, Pekuah.

Nekayah, who is depicted favorably by Johnson, has had the education of a woman of quality; she is taught to dance, to exhibit good breeding, and to follow the example of her teacher. However, the Princess is not satisfied with this limited education and expresses a desire to leave the kingdom with her brother so that she may learn about the outside world:

> I am equally weary of confinement with yourself, and not less desirous of knowing what is done or suffered in the world. Permit me to fly with you from this tasteless tranquility which will yet grow more loathsome when you have left (XIV).

The Princess and her company see a "light beyond (XIV)" their protective womb; this light is the illumination of knowledge. Nekayah is as relentless in her pursuit of information as is Rasselas. After overcoming the social stigma placed upon her by her high station, her fright

"because those that came into her presence did not prostrate themselves before her (XV)," she and Rasselas make an equal division of the work, which emphasizes the fact that a woman may be as willing to learn as a man.

Nekayah's willingness to learn was not an acceptable virtue of women in the early eighteenth century. During the first half of the century, women were usually placed in inferior positions; women were required to give up all land and possessions to their husbands, and a husband's debts were payable through a charge on his wife's jewels and property. According to men, women were not placed in high positions because men wished to save females from fatigue and danger. Yet, it was obviously to the male's advantage to keep the female ignorant, fearful, and weak. Nekayah differs from many of the English women who exhibited submissiveness during Johnson's age. Johnson has her enter the "dreadful gloom" of the pyramid because she feels she "must not learn cowardice, nor leave at last undone what I came thither only to do (XXXI)." Thus, the Princess Nekayah retains her equal standing with her brother and shows that educated women are neither inferior to men nor afraid of knowledge.

The treatment of Pekuah also reflects a change in attitude towards women. Pekuah is kidnapped by the Arab for a ransom, and the tale she relates after she is returned is one that advocates education for women. Johnson

portrays the women in the harem as simple-minded. He does so because he wishes to show that educated women are more interesting and more admirable than uneducated women. Because of their inability to read or to travel beyond their pleasant prison, the harem women have few ideas and are unable to converse about anything. These women "had no ideas but of the few things that were within their view, and had hardly any names for anything but their clothes and their food (XXXIX)." Cloaked in ignorance, the women find that all types of "curious work" are required of them, a requirement which stifles their curiousity about the outside world. However, Pekuah, who is accustomed to an environment of liberty and learning, who is "accustomed to stronger operations (XXXIX)" of the mind, can receive no happiness from such a protective atmosphere. "Delighted to hear" her observations and eager to teach her the movements of the stars, the Arab, with "studied procrastination(XXXIX)" delays returning Pekuah. This procrastination demonstrates his boredom with the harem girls, who bear a striking resemblance to the weak, submissive, virtuous and modest wives of seventeenth and early eighteenth century England. The harem girls serve him continuously, but cannot serve his unquenchable thirst for meaningful conversation.

In the scene involving the Astronomer, Dr. Johnson asserts that it is the highest injustice for a woman to be prohibited from the joys of life, and that the same

studies that raise the character of a man should not be denied to a woman, specifically, Pekuah's desire to help the Astronomer through the study of astronomy. The Astronomer's fixation concerning his power to control and distribute the seasons is a cause for Imlac's worry over the dangers of the "uncertain continuance of reason (XLIII)." Imlac has been unable to dissuade the Astronomer from his insanity, and Rasselas, unacquainted with astronomy, is also unable to wrench the scientist from his twisted beliefs. Thus, Pekuah, knowledgeable of the heavens because of her association with the Arab, and the Princess go to visit the learned man under the pretense that Pekuah would like to continue her studies with him. Imlac, who speaks according to the typical English male's opinion of the times that men, and not women, are leaders and teachers of men, advises Pekuah of his fears:

> "I am afraid," said Imlac, "that he will soon weary of your company; men advanced far in knowledge do not love to repeat the elements of their art, and I am not certain that even of the elements, as he will deliver them, connected with inferences, and mingled with reflections, you are a capable auditress (XLVI)."

However, the Astronomer looks upon her "as a prodigy of genius," and it is through her visits that he comes to the realization that his obsession with learning has deprived him of the comfort of female companionship and the tranquility of domesticity. Even Imlac, who was at first sceptical of a woman's ability to help in a serious

situation, advises the Astronomer to "fly to business or to Pekuah (XLVI)" when old fears begin to override his sense of reason. Imlac does so because he realizes that Pekuah is not a quack doctor whose medicine interferes with the healing process, but a spiritual mender whose knowledge and compassion speed the healing process.

Pekuah's healing ability surpasses the normal societal expectations of a woman, which were all based on finding a husband. In Johnson's England, a genteel or middle class woman was groomed for domesticity from the day of her birth. She was taught a particular manner of behavior and forced to hold her head in a certain way, all under the penalty of never finding a husband if she did not follow the accepted set of rules. Women in the late eighteenth century began to question this attitude. Once again, Pekuah's adventure offers a comment on married life, or more accurately, a criticism of married life. Pekuah's abduction is not an ordinary Eastern Tale because it relates no romance; the Arab is after the gold, not Pekuah. To pass the long "tediousness of time(XXXIX)," she learns astronomy, and her reaction to the meetings is one of boredom. Instead of lying in expectation of fulfilled desires, Pekuah has a disdainful attitude towards the Arab's growing affection. Bored with the Arab and his camp, a boredom which is hauntingly similar to the one experienced in the Happy Valley, she longs to return to her mistress and to return to the quest for the choice

of life. Pekuah relates her growing dissatisfaction to her listeners:

> I grew at last hopeless and dejected, and cared so little to entertain him, that he for a while more frequently talked with my maids. That he should fall in love with them, or with me, might have been equally fatal, and I was not much pleased with the growing friendship (XXXIX).

Therefore, Pekuah, unlike most women of her time, is content to be free of male companionship. Also, Johnson equates male companionship with the sterility of life while he equates individual freedom for the female with the productivity of life.

Johnson's treatment of women's ideas is favorable during the debate on marriage, a comparison of the single life to the married state. Rasselas asserts that the single life is destructive to society since the single are constantly looking for companionship. Rasselas says both marriage and the single life are bad, but the single life is doomed, while the married life to Rasselas is accidental or avoidable. However, Rasselas is giving a man's point of view. The Princess views marriage as one form of human misery:

> When I see and reckon the various forms of connubial felicity, the unexpected causes of lasting discord, the diversities of temper, the oppositions of opinion, the rude collisions, of contrary desire where both are urged by violent impulses, the obstinate contests of disagreeing virtues where both are supported by consciousness of good intention, I am sometimes disposed to think...that marriage is rather permitted than approved and

> that none, but by the instigation of a passion too much indulged, entangle themselves with indissoluble compacts (XXVIII).

During the first half of the century, a woman was not only supposed to be a faithful wife, but also a faithful upper-servant. The reaction of Nekayah is the later, more liberal eighteenth century attitude which Johnson supported.

During the first half of the century, Daniel Defoe lamented the predominance of the mind over the heart in marital relationships, a predominance which resulted in "how much marriage, how little friendship."[40] This statement echoes another fault in Rasselas's judgment concerning marriage. He believes that if a wife possesses reason, and since to reason well is to be happy, than a reasonable wife should be happy:

> "But surely," interposed the prince,"you suppose the chief motive of choice forgotten or neglected. Whenever I shall seek a wife, it shall be my first question, whether she be willing to be led by reason (XXIX)."

However, the Princess, with her common-sense wisdom concerning the nature of man, replies that there are few occasions in life which can be decided by reason. For man, "there are a thousand familiar disputes which reason never can decide (XXIX)," and it would be ridiculous to apply reason to "all the minute details of a domestic day (XXXIX)." Just as a preoccupation with rational judgment has distorted the thinking process of the Astron-

omer, so does it distort the mind of Rasselas. Rasselas has separated the mind from the heart where the institution of marriage is concerned. Nekayah knows this and points out the "wretchedness" of Rasselas's philosophy: "Wretched would be the pair above all names of wretchedness, who should be doomed to adjust by reason every morning all the minute details of a domestic day (XXIX)."

Although Rasselas's philosophy is rational, it is also nearly impossible to carry out in action, and although Nekayah's philosophy seems pessimistic, as did Johnson's philosophy concerning life and "The Vanity of Human Wishes," it is presented as the correct road to follow and the only possible one. Domestic life does not consist of ideal situations. The Princess advises that since life does not consist of perfect circumstances, of "a time neither too early for the father, nor too late for the husband," people should take "the blessings set before you (XXIX)," make their choices, and be content. Thus, in this case it is not the man who concludes properly on the subject of marriage, but the woman, supposedly the inferior partner.

When the Princess makes her comments upon private life, she, the empiricist, once again demonstrates that domestic discord is more prevalent than domestic tranquility. After investigating many households throughout various lands, the Princess observes that although discord is "not inevitably and fatally necessary" in every domestic

situation, it seems to be "not easily avoided (XXVI)." The Princess tries to explain the cause for domestic strife:

> Some husbands are imperious, and some wives perverse; and, as it is always more easy to do evil than good, though the wisdom or virtue of one can rarely make many happy, the folly or vice of one man often makes many miserable (XXVI).

Again using a rational mode of inquiry instead of an empirical one, the prince thinks it "dangerous" to become involved in such a contract. But once again, he has not included the workings of his heart or the workings of his eye, both necessary to Johnson's philosophy, in his conclusion, and thus, he has come to an incomplete conclusion. Nekayah knows that the heart of man is the ruler of man:

> To live without feeling or exciting sympathy, to be fortunate without adding to the felicity of others, or afflicted without tasting the balm of pity, is a state more gloomy than solitude; it is not retreat but exclusion from mankind. Marriage has many pains, but celibacy has no pleasures (XXVI).

Therefore, Nekayah does not reject the institution of marriage, but accepts life with its limitations upon freedom and upon life and has made the wise deduction that life must be accepted in all its manifestations.

Perceiving man and his nature requires wisdom. This quality of wisdom is more apparent in Princess Nekayah and her favorite, Pekuah, than in Rasselas. In

the section in which Imlac relates the story of the Astronomer, Rasselas is unable to perceive the irony of the situation; the Astronomer's intellect, his tool for learning, has become the symbol of his downfall, his own tool for self-destruction. However, "the prince heard this narration with very serious regard; but the princess smiled, and Pekuah convulsed herself with laughter (XLIII)." Thus, only the women understand the irony of the tale, while Rasselas becomes an object of the satire. Yet, while understanding the irony, the women are also able to understand the seriousness and are able to help him later, whereas Rasselas cannot help him.

Imlac, in an effort to broaden the knowledge of his young and innocent companions, offers to show them the catacombs, those ancient tombs in which the bodies of the earliest and richest generations were housed. However, Rasselas does not perceive the connection between the past and the present, the living and the dead. Rasselas does not go to see them out of curiousity, but goes to them "since nothing else is offered," and he states that he "shall place this with many other things which I have done because I would do something (XLVII)." However, Pekuah, no longer afraid to enter the "habitations of the dead," recognizes the importance of the past and of former beliefs on the nature of man's soul, and thus, descends into the tomb. Nekayah, unafraid of inquiry, asks Imlac about the soul, about its immortality. The

only reason the group finally leaves is that Rasselas, reminded by these rows of bodies of the shortness of life, views the pyramids as "gloomy(XLVIII)" reflections of man's mortality, and thus, fearful of his own decay, he is unable to understand the catacombs historical and philosophical importance.

The female characters in Rasselas are strong-willed, able to perceive a situation and make their own valid conclusions. Unlike the accompanying women, however, Rasselas is easily swayed by the different teachers he meets along the way. Listening to a "wise and happy man (XVIII)," a man of learning, lecture on morality, Rasselas is convinced he has found "a man who can teach all that is necessary to be known (XVIII)." Although Imlac warns Rasselas to "be not too hasty to trust or to admire the teachers of morality," for "they discourse like angels, but they live like men, Rasselas vows to "learn his doctrines, and imitate his life (XVIII)." However, he becomes disillusioned when his great teacher loses his only daughter from a fever and finds that his philosophy of wisdom without emotion can only be related; it cannot be lived. The Princess, a member of royalty who has somehow learned common-sense wisdom in a protective environment, states that man "does nothing who endeavours to do more than is allowed to humanity (XIV)." This woman realizes that the teachings of this man who believed that true

happiness came from no longer being "inflamed by anger, emasculated by tenderness, or depressed by grief (XVIII)" must be false teachings, for they go well beyond the limits given to mankind, and womankind, by the Creator.

The wise and happy man has not supplied Rasselas with his "choice of life," so he continues his search for another teacher. To find if solitude is the secret to happiness, the small group travel to the home of a hermit who had become disillusioned with a "world full of snares, discord, and misery (XXI)," and had thus retreated to a place far from mankind where he intented to remain the rest of his life. Rasselas, intrigued by this lifestyle, states, "He will remove most certainly from evil...who shall devote himself to that solitude which you have recommended by your example (XXI)." However, Rasselas does not understand that by removing oneself from evil, one must also remove himself from all good. The Princess understands this concept when she speaks about the right time for one to marry:

> "Every hour," answered the princess, "confirms my prejudice in favour of the position so often uttered by the mouth of Imlac, that nature sets her gifts on the right hand and on the left. Those conditions which flatter hope and attract desire are so constituted, that, as we approach one, we recede from another. There are goods so opposed that we cannot seize both, but, by too much prudence, may pass between them at too great a distance to reach either.... No man can taste the fruits of autumn while he is delighting his scent with the flowers of the spring; no man can at the same time fill his cup from the source and from the mouth of the Nile (XXIX)."

Thus, the Princess has come to the same conclusion as the hermit: by escaping "the example of bad men," the hermit has also escaped "the counsel and conclusion of the good (XXI)," which he needs desperately. Therefore, once again, a woman and the experienced Imlac have perceived the truth, while Rasselas has been fooled by the appearance of things around him.

V. The Conclusion, in Which Much is Concluded

Johnson once remarked to Boswell, "Men and women are my subject of inquiry."[41] In The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia, Johnson wished to point out that human limitations make happiness in this world ephemeral, accidental, and the product of hope rather than reality. The wise people will accept submissively the grimness of life and seek no more lasting felicity than is given by a quiet conscience. They will live with an eye on eternity and be able to understand that happiness is never possible, virtually unattainable, on earth. Dr. Johnson's philosophy is echoed throughout his works, but in none more pointedly than the final lines of his poem, "The Vanity of Human Wishes":

> Still raise for good the supplicating voice,
> But leave to Heaven the measure and the
> choice....
> These goods for man the laws of Heaven ordain,
> These goods He grants, who grants the power to
> gain;
> With these celestial Wisdom calms the mind,
> And makes the happiness she does not find.
> (351-2, 365-8)

In Rasselas, the characters who come closest to these observations are Imlac, who has learned from his many experiences and acts as a guide for the others, and the two women. Pekuah, a wiser woman than her station as a simple servant girl would seem to entail, has already

made the comment that life must be accepted come what may, and the Princess makes the final remark on the futility of earthly enjoyment:

> "To me," said the Princess, "the choice of life is become less important; I have hereafter to think only on the choice of eternity (XLVIII)."

In the final chapter, entitled, "The Conclusion, in Which Nothing is Concluded," the women begin to form more realistic "schemes of happiness" than Rasselas does. Pekuah dreams of being a prioress instead of a queen; the Princess wishes to become an educator of "prudence" and "piety" instead of a shepherdess. By contrast, Rasselas, although he now wishes for a "little kingdom" instead of a "perfect government," is not satisfied with his own wish, and "was always adding to the number of his subjects (XLIX)." Thus, the women are able to accept their earthly limitations and hope for lives which will lead them to a quiet conscience. However, Rasselas, unable to live within his human limits, continually reaches for more than the creator has allowed for him.

Thus, from their appearance into the story until the end, the principal female characters are treated favorably, while Rasselas is treated ironically.

Endnotes

[1]James Boswell, The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D., (New York: Random House, Inc., n.d.), p. 349.

[2]Ibid., pp. 270-1.

[3]Ibid., p. 804-5.

[4]Goldwin Smith, The History of England, (New York: Charles Scribner"s Sons, 1966), p. 463.

[5]Boswell, The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D., p. 1070.

[6]Ibid., p. 805.

[7]Ibid., p. 122.

[8]Lawrence Stone, The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800, (New York: Harper and Row, Inc., 1979), pp. 186-7.

[9]Ibid., p.187.

[10]Ibid., p. 186.

[11]Samuel Johnson, Johnsonian Miscellanies, edited by George Birbeck Hill, LL.D., 2 vols., (New York: Barnes and Noble Inc., 1966), Vol. I., p. 175.

[12]Stone, p.230.

[13]Stone, p. 165.

[14]Dorothy M. George, England in Johnson's Day, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1928), p.58

[15]Boswell, p.832.

[16]Stone, p. 230.

[17]Stone, p. 231.

[18]Stone, p. 227.

[19]Daniel Defoe, Review, 1704, edited by A.W. Secord, Vol. III, Supplementary Journal, No. I, (Oxford: Oxford Press, 1727), p. 8.

[20]Stone, p. 240.

[21]Samuel Johnson, *'Rasselas' and Essays*, edited by Charles Peake, (London: Routeledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), p. 236. All subsequent quotations from *Rasselas* were taken from this edition and will be noted in the text.

[22]Boswell, p. 303.

[23]Boswell, p. 606.

[24]Boswell, p. 405.

[25]W. Jackson Bates, *Samuel Johnson*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), p. 147.

[26]Ibid., p. 148.

[27]Ibid., p.14.

[28]Ibid., p.14.

[29]Johnson, *Johnsonian Miscellanies*, Vol. I, pp.153-4.

[30]Boswell, p. 359.

[31]Boswell, p. 349.

[32]Boswell, p. 271.

[33]Johnson, *Johnsonian Miscellanies*, Vol. I, p.171.

[34]Boswell, pp, 280-1.

[35]Boswell, p. 122.

[36]Boswell, p. 1094.

[37]Boswell, p. 1094.

[38]*The Ridpath Library of Universal Literature*, edited by John Clark Ridpath, LL.D., Vol. XI, (New York: The Fifth Avenue Library Society, 1906), p. 183.

[39]Gwen J. Kolb, "*The Structure of 'Rasselas,*' PMLA LXVI, (1951), p. 698.

[40]Stone, p. 181.

[41]Boswell, p. 129.

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